

"MCNAMARA AND THE PENTAGON"

A comparison of the written transcript of this interview with the actual program gives strong evidence of the important role of the television camera even in a relatively static presentation. There is little that is startling or even noteworthy in the printed text, and relatively little basis for a firm inference as to the personality of the speaker, whereas the combination of picture and sound gives an impression of McNamara's personality that is both strong and coherent.

Although the precise reaction of the individual viewer would depend upon his prior image of McNamara and upon the matters that the viewer's attitudes and interests made salient, I suspect that on balance the overall impact of this show may have been quite unfavorable to McNamara, since it exhibited with rather devastating clarity just those traits which his unsympathetic critics have already stereotyped in the public mind: cocksureness, reasoning not in itself simplistic but asserted with undue dogmatism, deprecation of the role of military experience and intuition, combined -- adding insult to injury -- with denial of the depth of military resentment, deprecation of uncertainties and complexities beyond those he explicitly recognizes, a patronizing didactic manner, and apparent lack of any sense of personal limitations (at least, relative to the opposition!). This is the way Goldwater, Hanson Baldwin, McClellan, et al. describe the Secretary; and that is, I'm afraid, the way he exposed himself to the television audience in this interview. After this program, his most sympathetic proponent could hardly claim that the stereotyped characterization is without any basis. Nor did the program seem deliberately unfair (although of course it's impossible to judge that fully without considering all the material from which these excerpts were collected). At a number of points the interviewer could be said to have tipped McNamara off as to the kind of criticism which his present remarks were supporting ("there's been suggestions...that you...give them simple little lessons in things," this following a simple little lesson by McNamara totally irrelevant to the question asked). Yet the Secretary blithely avoided every opportunity to take the edge off those criticisms by hinting at reserves of modesty or uncertainty or at a consciousness that some of his decisions might reasonably, and did, give rise to controversy. If Reasoner was digging holes, McNamara was leaping into them with great zest.

So far as it goes then, the program must be considered a valid exposition. But how far does it go? Is this all there is to McNamara? That is not a rhetorical question: I believe there are many knowledgeable people who would be willing to answer "yes." This includes many people

who have witnessed him far more, and in a greater variety of circumstances, than I have. Nevertheless, on the basis of one experience with him that lasted scarcely longer than your program -- specifically, a two-hour discussion over lunch in his office -- I believe that the answer is "no."

When one finds that his privately-expressed views and modes of thought are at considerable variance from the opinions, style of reasoning, and pattern of behavior publicly exhibited, there is probably no single, best answer to the question: "Which is the real McNamara"? But it is possible to say, even on the basis of a conversation shorter than this one, that the divergence is there, that the Secretary is self-conscious of its existence, and that he perceives complex motives for maintaining it: relating to his needs to compromise multiple and often conflicting responsibilities, objectives, and constraints.

This is not to say that the extent of divergence is more extreme than is probably the case with most high political figures, nor that his public face is to an unusual degree a facade. Any decisionmaker who must balance the demands of the President, the Services, Congress, Allies, and his own staff, and who, when he speaks publicly must speak to all these audiences at once, and to the Soviet Union as well, must weigh his words, and on occasion simplify, obscure, or forego reference to considerations, legitimate but controversial, that may count heavily with him. What is noteworthy is that "even" McNamara responds to this imperative. That point does not go quite without saying, for neither his stereotype nor his actual performance on occasions such as this program tend to suggest that he is capable of acting so "politically" or, to use a nicer word, "diplomatically." (I am not referring so much to party politics as to political relationships within the Pentagon, between the Administration and Congress, and within the Western Alliance.)

As for the content of his views, all that seems necessary to say here is that it differed from the exposition in this program in two basic respects: (a) the reasons he emphasized for specific decisions and public positions were more varied and less simple than those he tends to cite in public; (b) he showed a grave appreciation of the complex responsibilities he bears, not only to this generation of Americans but to future generations and to the people of the world, as second in command of the American nuclear power.

The first of these points can easily be substantiated by a great deal of internal documentation in the Pentagon. However he may choose to express himself in public, McNamara's mind does not run to dichotomies, or to lists of relevant factors that stop with two or three. The world that McNamara sees may seem, to other eyes, unnaturally sharp, suspiciously free of haze in the far reaches; but it is not a simple world.

In this one respect, perhaps, the program did fall short of what it might have achieved. It might be impossible to induce McNamara, in front of a national television audience, to be other than didactic; but conceivably another interviewer might have drawn from him, on a few points, the seminar talk instead of the grade-school chart.

Whether any interviewer could have persuaded him to talk more frankly and perceptively on such touchy subjects as civil-military relations in the Pentagon is a harder question; probably not. Likewise for my second point, the implications of the nuclear weapons era. The cross-currents of attitudes on that subject, among our Allies, our opponents and our own electorate, are too varied and too emotional to make it easy for a Secretary of Defense to air his reflections and concerns freely upon these matters. (What complicates this problem for McNamara is precisely his consciousness of the present reliance of the Western Alliance upon nuclear weapons, and the responsibilities this imposes.)

None of this is to suggest that Candid Camera might have led viewers to confuse Robert McNamara with, say, Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson could not, I suppose, cut quite the positive, dogmatic figure McNamara presented, even as a deliberate facade; and that is only a sign of deeper differences between them. If an intimate conversation reveals qualities that did not appear before this television camera (any more than before a Congressional committee), it does not reveal, for example, evident humility, uncertainty, or lack of self-confidence in his own judgment. (At least, mine did not.) In short, the program was at least true to the elements of truth in the stereotypes of the Secretary. And that encompasses a good part of his public personality. Perhaps no program was likely to do more.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE MCNAMARA TELEVISION SHOW

These observations on the McNamara television show are made from the very slender base line of two appearances before him as an intelligence spokesman for the Joint Staff at the time he hoisted his flag in the Pentagon on 20 January 1961. These were early meetings of his top Defense Department staff, including the Service Secretaries. Implicit in his manner was polite disinterest in the "briefing process," which only barely exceeded his lack of interest in "large, staff meetings." His attitude toward briefings was, frankly, a relief to me, for I did not look forward with relish to regular appearances on a wide variety of topics in an atmosphere of such cold courtesy. It would have been a major continuing work to keep posted at the level of detail and range of subject that his first questions revealed. To me, it looked like two years of very thin ice ahead, with rewards hardly related to the skills required.

I was surprised at the warmth -- relative to my early observations -- of the personality projected in the show. My reaction to this was that some very skillful coaching had been done with the deliberate attempt to convey this impression.

An even greater surprise was the ingenuousness with which Mr. McNamara handled controversial topics. The show opened with a question on his reportedly critical relations with top service officers. His reply suggested that public reporting of bruised feelings on the part of senior military officers was incorrect. My reaction was that either he was incredibly insensitive to the emotional tone of those with whom he comes in contact, or was simply choosing to ignore the existence of resentment.

- a. His association of controversy with progress implied, for example, that he welcomes controversy, which does not appear to me to really be the case.
- b. I similarly felt that his reply to the question regarding the possibility that the TFX award to General Dynamics had properly reflected considerations of economics and geography was so pat as to sound unconvincing.
- c. He addressed controversy and senior officer's resentments again on page 16 and the reference to Art Buchwald's column in language that was in clear contradiction with the apparent facts.

Another surprise was Mr. McNamara's use of cheap advertising tricks like the example offered on page 5 of substituting a plastic wheel for a machined steel wheel. Any Defense official in any administration could have called up similar instances. Somehow, the trick, despite its political utility, did not comport with the image I had formed of the Secretary as a decision-maker on rational lines. My reaction was that he had been touted into this act in order to put his case most graphically to the public. My feeling was that, in his shoes, it would have been natural for me to employ this tactic, but that it was unnatural for Mr. McNamara to do so.

Other lawyer's tricks in putting the political case followed shortly thereafter, notably the statements about increasing the size and effectiveness of forces (which cost more) while saving money -- specifically by paring 14 billion dollars from the budgets submitted by the military (again, almost any Secretary of Defense could have made the same statement). These statements may have been literally true, but they were obviously irrelevant.

I may have my "critical glasses" too firmly on, but I also felt it possible that he may have deliberately slipped in attributing to Khrushchev the phraseology "wars of aggression, or subversion." In any event, he quickly justified himself when Reasoner picked him up on the misquote.

Highly ingenuous again was Mr. McNamara's attempt to portray the U.S. success in the Cuban Crisis of October 1962 as the result of a policy of balanced conventional and nuclear forces. I was also made uncomfortable by his implication that the Air Force Association opposition to the partial test ban stemmed from a lack of intelligence access. I see many reasons for entering into the test ban, but intelligence information hardly appears in the major role.

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It was an unusually intimate portrait of such a high-placed public official. Whether this is attributable to the on-camera personality of the Secretary himself or to skillful camera work, I have no way of knowing. But the camera was very sensitive to the sudden hardening and softening of features--particularly around the mouth and details such as the playing of the hands with the grease pencil.

There is always something a bit disconcerting in seeing an "office" or a "role" close up--so close that the illusion provided by the make-up, the regalia of the Government, is dissipated. The television camera does this more than the unaided human eye, I believe. When you visit a man for an hour in his office your eye is constantly taking in objects, and artifacts of the tradition, that perpetuate the illusion of Office. But the camera focuses your attention [more so than most visitors allow themselves, because of their own uneasiness] on the man himself, totally--on the way he parts his hair, on every twinkle and twitch.

Toward McNamara particularly, the authority-figure par excellence in the defense establishment, I doubt that anyone in the official or quasi-official [RAND] defense bureaucracy could react to the content of what was being said as much as to the person who was saying it. The experience must have been for many of us similar to the experience of going to a stag party for the first time with dad.

At a time of bubbling rebelliousness against the authority-figure within his own family, the opportunity for new intimacy is unlikely to dampen the emotional screens which are already filtering out the objectifiable content of the pro- and anti-McNamara positions.

I believe the interview has accelerated the erosion of McNamara's effectiveness as Secretary of Defense.

COMMENT ON CBS REPORTS

Pro:

1. Relaxed, fluent, persuasive performance
2. Good presentation of a positive management philosophy
3. Good stage business
4. Technically good

Con:

1. Whitewash if frictions
2. Superficial in many places, e.g. penalties of test ban
3. Mr. McNamara never wrong
4. Questions by reporter not sufficiently probing, not enough digging

1. I believe McNamara's comments attempt to give the impression that the things he is trying to do in his position are unique with him: i.e., save money, stop waste, etc.

2. While McNamara admits at one point that he has made many mistakes, his performance with respect to every claim made by his detractors (in the film) leads you to believe he thinks otherwise. Quoting McNamara now: "Certainly not," "That's absolutely wrong," etc.

3. I believe Secretary McNamara engaged in a complete misrepresentation of the opposition to the test ban treaty. He made no attempt to deal with any of the legitimate objections to such a treaty.

SOME COMMENTS ON "CBS REPORTS: 'McNAMARA AND THE PENTAGON'"

This is an interesting show for various reasons. It covers a wide range of subjects. A certain degree of superficiality is inevitable in an interview that jumps from one topic to the next and does not permit discussion. Viewers of the show who do not follow defense policy or do not read their newspapers closely will have made a nodding acquaintance with a large variety of subjects: saving in the Defense Department, the TFX controversy, deterrence, the Test Ban Treaty, accidental war, DIA, McNamara's notions of management, of Cuba, Vietnam, de Gaulle, the Air Force Association, poetry readings to Russian workers, etc.

Perhaps some viewers will have suspected that certain parts of the interview were cut out. To me it seemed that some of the answers were shortened by an editor.

I think it was a psychological mistake to let Mr. McNamara use easel and crayon so often. Sometimes it looked as though he was briefing the slow-witted instead of answering Mr. Reasoner, and the gimmick increased the impression that the discussion was staged rather than natural and informal. Inadvertantly, the gimmick also confirmed the view quoted by Mr. Reasoner that the Secretary likes to give "little lessons in things."

The interviewer was a bit stiff, but an element of drama was introduced by his phrasing some of his questions in the first part of the show quite aggressively. He hid skillfully the discourtesy that the press in democracy is permitted to show toward men in public office by referring to the critical views that have been expressed by others. This performance will have pleased, I suppose, both the little man in the audience and the serious critic of the Secretary.

Evidently, the Secretary, himself, enjoyed this way of playing the game. I thought the show gave a vivid picture of his personality. He responded firmly, eloquently, sometimes informatively, and quite often by counterattack. Note his frequent rebuttals of the type: you are "just wrong," you or they have "no basis for the (critical) comment," "unfair," "certainly not," etc.

I never met Mr. McNamara. Trying to judge from the show alone, I would say he is a highly intelligent man, energetic, constantly in a rush, efficient, free of any self-doubt, endowed with a retentive memory for figures, left-handed, and probably impatient with people less intelligent than himself. When it seemed essential to make at least a show of humility in deference to democratic mores, he did so without causing the viewer more embarrassment than Mr. Reasoner had done by putting the Secretary on the spot. For example, in reply to Mr. Reasoner saying that one congressman had called the Secretary "Mr. I-Have-All-The-Answers-McNamara...is this your attitude?" the Secretary said, "No, perhaps they don't know how much I don't know and there is much indeed."

There was one interesting, and perhaps characteristic, slip. When asked about possible resentment against him among top military men, the Secretary replied, "Well, I would not use the same terms as you did, but I don't feel a resentment." He had not been asked about his feelings.

More speculatively, I would infer from reading and seeing the show that sensitivity, wisdom, and kindness are not the most prominent characteristics of the Secretary.

The firmness of the Secretary probably appeared to some people as arrogance, an impression which I did not get. The audience in which I sat at RAND literally roared with laughter several times at the firm and brusk way in which Mr. McNamara swept criticism aside.

Similarly backfiring were the commercials, at least to this audience. They, too, produced peals of laughter. This was especially true of the commercial at the beginning in which an umbrella was shown. Apparently CBS did not consider that an umbrella is not only a symbol of the blessings of adequate insurance, but also of a type of statesmanship not easily reconciled with incisiveness. It seemed to me that the audience reacted with nervous or malicious laughter to the inadvertent humor of the umbrella sandwiched between images of efficient management.

A NOTE ON "CBS REPORTS" MCNAMARA INTERVIEW

The interview format, to a greater extent even than a Congressional hearing, displays to good advantage the articulate, self-confident, and incisive approach of the Secretary to both the broad-gauge and the intricately detailed problems of national security. In part his performance fitted the caricature which is becoming familiar throughout the defense community -- the ready recourse to symbols of cost-effectiveness at work, the reliance on graphic illustration of decision factors, the aloofness and apparent imperviousness to criticisms of his methods and decisions. But overwhelming the caricature was an image of what seems to be the real man -- a hard-headed, knowledgeable administrator, perhaps a shade too cocksure and prone to rule out important considerations in an effort to resolve complex issues, but clearly competent and devoted to a balanced and efficient military program for the United States. It is true that Harry Reasoner's questions, though often surprisingly frank, were hardly calculated to elicit responses very different from those the Secretary offered; they provided a natural platform for McNamara's restatement of his positions on many topics (TFX, the test ban, alleged downgrading of military advisers, etc.). But even though the views were seldom unexpected, the Secretary's expression of them afforded valuable insights into his personality and ability. Although one acquainted with the difficulties of devising wise national security policies is obliged to worry that the Secretary's quest for military postures supporting a strategy of flexible response may, paradoxically, impose its own rigidities on the defense establishment, the interview was another welcome reminder that McNamara approaches his tasks soberly, able and willing to make the hard choices -- indeed, to seek them out -- and prepared to bear the responsibility for them. By revealing the Secretary's own quick grasp of DOD problems, the program conveyed a clear impression that McNamara is a man who, by careful attention to his homework, is striving to squeeze the utmost out of the nation's military manpower and machinery, and to relate them both to a rational U.S. strategy.

1. The over-all impact of the report was good: it gave the American audience an opportunity to see McNamara as an individual, a man methodically directing the Department of Defense. It was, perhaps, somewhat of a shock to see the DoD being run as one feels the Ford Motor Co. was run prior to McNamara's change of job, but the net effect on the DoD appears to be one of improvement. The questions put to McNamara were as cutting and piercing as any of his critics could have wished, and his replies, while not always deft and straight to the point, were delivered in an easy, offhand fashion, demonstrating his objective approach to his responsibilities.
2. Throughout, McNamara gave the appearance of a man who had with foreknowledge taken on a thankless task and was determined to see it to a fruitful end. He showed great confidence in his own abilities and in the advisory structure which he has created about himself. It was remarkable that he equated the military side of the Pentagon with his "technical advisors." In this fashion he established that he was willing to give ear to military opinion, but that it would not be given undue weight in formulating his final decision.
3. In retrospect, McNamara obviously depicted himself as a prime example of the modern management man. It is not difficult to picture him calling together the heads of the Design, Production, and Sales Departments of FoMoCo and listening to them tell him what the next year's automobile should look like, how production costs can be cut, and what the big sales pitch should be. Naturally, the three views would necessarily be somewhat dissimilar, and the final decision would rest in his hands. In such a setting, there is little doubt that lower levels of management probably found it politic to accept these judgments and cooperate to the fullest. If the decision made one's position intolerable, one could always find a job with General Motors. And if the decision was a good one, stockholders and the Board of Directors patted everyone appreciatively on the back for a job well done.

The present picture at the Pentagon deviates markedly from the one above. The three services have never been convinced that the boss's word is law and that cooperation is mutually and individually beneficial. Furthermore, a general officer in the Air Force, finding himself in disagreement with the "boss," is in no position to sell his talents to the Navy. And, finally, one cannot say that Congress looks upon cost-cutting and other economy measures with great favor; for many Congressmen, the defense budget is simply another form of the "pork barrel,"

and one that can be raised to sanctimonious heights because "it is in the interest of national and world defense." I wonder how many Congressmen have telephoned McNamara to congratulate him on the money he has saved the nation by closing a military base in their personal constituency?

4. On two issues, I find that I must disagree with the answers given by McNamara, though purely on intuitive, not factual, grounds. First, I find it difficult to believe that no political pressure was brought to bear in selecting General Dynamics/Ft. Worth for the TFX contract. (In all fairness, I must add that had I been in his position, and had the over-all characteristics of the two proposals been essentially equal, I believe that I too would have awarded the contract to GD/Ft. Worth, simply as a matter of national interest.)

Second, I do not consider as correct McNamara's unqualified denial that wartime use by the SU of large nuclear weapons might have serious effects on this nation's hardened missile sites. Had he replied that it has thus far been impossible to completely determine the complete range of nuclear weapons effects against all our weapon systems, but that studies are presently in progress and any necessary remedial action will be taken, then I would have concurred. A categorical denial by McNamara may have been the "correct" action for him to take before a national audience, but it is difficult or disheartening to believe that his true feelings are as strong as his statement.